



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Alligator Snapping Turtle

Arlington, Texas Ecological Services Field Office

Alligator Snapping Turtle

Macrochelys temminckii

Description

The alligator snapping turtle is the largest freshwater turtle in North America, native to the river systems that flow into the Gulf of Mexico. They are secretive and highly aquatic, preferring large rivers, lakes, tributaries, bayous, and ponds. Males are much larger than females, weighing between 155 and 175 pounds. Alligator snapping turtles have a primitive appearance characterized by a spiky shell, a large head, and sharp beak. Alligator snapping turtles are the only turtle that has a predatory lure (worm-like appendage on the tongue) that acts as bait to attract fish. They also eat crayfish, smaller turtles, insects, nutria, snakes, birds, and vegetation.



Alligator snapping turtle in Harris County, TX
Photo: Viviana Ricardez, TexasTurtles.org

Distribution

Alligator snapping turtle's historical range is primarily the southeastern United States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Texas.



Alligator snapping turtle at Tarrant County study site in Texas
Photo: Viviana Ricardez, TexasTurtles.org

Life History

The alligator snapping turtle reaches sexual maturity at 11-12 years for males and 13-21 years for females. Females emerge from the water to lay eggs, typically once a year (May to July) with a clutch size averaging 28 eggs. The nests vary in distances from the water, usually between 8 and 656 ft. Incubation temperatures are an important nest factor due to temperature-dependent-sex-determination. Females are produced at extreme temperatures and males are produced at intermediate temperatures. Adults can live many years; one female was found in Kansas and was aged at 45 years. Captive alligator snapping turtles have lived more than 70 years.

Habitat

Alligator snapping turtles are generally found in slow-moving, deep water and prefer underwater structure such as submerged trees and root systems. They are usually found in water bodies with a mud bottom and

aquatic vegetation. Hatchlings utilize shallow water with some tree cover to protect them from predation. Besides humans, predators of hatchlings include

raccoons, river otters, and American alligators.



Alligator snapping turtle hatching
Photo: Bill Kirby, Sabine River Authority of Texas

Conservation

Threats to the alligator snapping turtle include hunting, incidentally harvested (bycatch) during commercial fishing, nest predation, habitat loss, and degradation. The alligator snapping turtle was petitioned in 2012 for listing under the Endangered Species Act, and is currently under review.

For Further Information:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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March 2021



Alligator Snapping Turtle Range
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Louisiana Ecological Services

References

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<https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Reptiles/Alligator-Snapping-Turtle>
- NatureServe. 2021. NatureServe Explorer [website]. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia.
Available <https://explorer.natureserve.org/>.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2019. Species status assessment report for the alligator snapping turtle (*Macrochelys temminckii*), Version 1.0. August 2019. Atlanta, GA.